



Competing discourses : early strategies for women's rights
by April Dawn Fosdick

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Abstract:

The American War for Independence established a sovereign American nation based upon the ideas of “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” Yet, most Americans were excluded from this discourse. Northern, white, middle-class women were among those denied actual economic, legal, and social independence after the Revolution, remaining under the common law of coverture (or legal dependence on their husband or father). Liberty, independence, and freedom became the basis for defining the American nation as well as masculinity. Thus, many women struggled to form a positive identity within a self-proclaimed “free” nation that kept them subordinate.

This study examines the “gendered” construction of the American nation. It also demonstrates how two main groups of white, middle-class women identified with the dominant discourse of white, colonial men. Attention is placed upon the changing (male) rhetoric of the Revolution, the domestic ideology of Catharine Beecher, and the linguistic strategies of the early women’s rights reformers. Ultimately, the excluding definitions that emerged from the Revolution shaped the way many women were able to identify with the new nation.

As frustrations among many women increased, strategies among influential middle-class women developed. Two dominant groups of women developed distinct approaches in forming a positive identity for female identity. The domestic reformers, such as Beecher, stressed the female superiority of women and argued that women exclusively should shape the values of America. Women’s rights activists, on the other hand, began developing a rights-based argument that called for an equal and legal footing with men. After the Civil War, women’s rights activists realized that their natural-rights language would not work to break down national and masculine definitions and gain them legal rights. It would take a less threatening rhetoric such as Beecher’s; and thus many suffragists began arguing that women could bring a moralizing influence to politics. In effect, the “competing discourses” of middle-class reformers in antebellum America demonstrate the way white women eventually obtained the vote based upon their female moral abilities.

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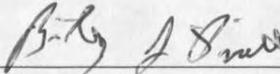
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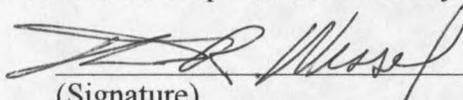
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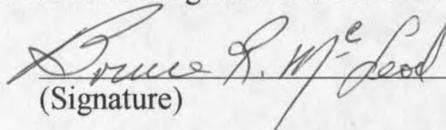
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
THESIS ABSTRACT	v
1. INTRODUCTION	1
2. CONSTRUCTING THE AMERICAN NATION	11
Defining Nation	12
American Definitions	17
3. CONSERVATIVE CATALYST CATHARINE BEECHER	33
A Change of Heart	36
Trial by Error	43
The Necessary Nature of Women	49
4. EARLY ROUTES TO LEGAL REFORM	53
Creating a New Image through Metaphor	57
A Democratic Utopia	65
5. CONCLUSION	68
BIBLIOGRAPHY	72

THESIS ABSTRACT

The American War for Independence established a sovereign American nation based upon the ideas of "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." Yet, most Americans were excluded from this discourse. Northern, white, middle-class women were among those denied actual economic, legal, and social independence after the Revolution, remaining under the common law of coverture (or legal dependence on their husband or father). Liberty, independence, and freedom became the basis for defining the American nation as well as masculinity. Thus, many women struggled to form a positive identity within a self-proclaimed "free" nation that kept them subordinate.

This study examines the "gendered" construction of the American nation. It also demonstrates how two main groups of white, middle-class women identified with the dominant discourse of white, colonial men. Attention is placed upon the changing (male) rhetoric of the Revolution, the domestic ideology of Catharine Beecher, and the linguistic strategies of the early women's rights reformers. Ultimately, the excluding definitions that emerged from the Revolution shaped the way many women were able to identify with the new nation.

As frustrations among many women increased, strategies among influential middle-class women developed. Two dominant groups of women developed distinct approaches in forming a positive identity for female identity. The domestic reformers, such as Beecher, stressed the female superiority of women and argued that women exclusively should shape the values of America. Women's rights activists, on the other hand, began developing a rights-based argument that called for an equal and legal footing with men. After the Civil War, women's rights activists realized that their natural-rights language would not work to break down national and masculine definitions and gain them legal rights. It would take a less threatening rhetoric such as Beecher's; and thus many suffragists began arguing that women could bring a moralizing influence to politics. In effect, the "competing discourses" of middle-class reformers in antebellum America demonstrate the way white women eventually obtained the vote based upon their female moral abilities.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

‘There once lived in a Farm Yard a great many Roosters and Hens, and it chanced one morning that a young Hen with a very fine voice began to crow. Thereupon all the Roosters hurried together and solemnly declared that there was nothing so dreadful as a Crowing Hen! Now there was in the Yard a Rooster who had always been feeble and could only cackle, but when the Hen mentioned this, the Roosters shook their heads and said, “females do not understand logic.” The moral to the story: There is a great deal of difference between a Cackling Rooster and a Crowing Hen.’¹

Intended to satirize the woman’s rights movement, most activists understood the above fable to be a true rendition of their struggle for equal rights. While one can interpret this parable on a number of levels, an important point to recognize is how fundamental language is to one’s understanding of his or her situation in the world. Imagery and symbols that words produce shape the meaning of an individual’s life at any given time and place in history. Words hold and designate power in ways that often remain unnoticed. As the above fable implies, human discourse, and in this instance, the discourse of nineteenth-century American, white, heterosexual, Protestant, middle-class men, has not only been an exclusive, but a more valued discourse when compared to those excluded from it. Power stems from a group’s consciousness that people (“like me”) have the same values, ideas, and goals, as well

as from the ability for a group to have the resources and ability to use force and violence against designated "others."

"Naming yourself" is one example of how contemporary American groups have given power to themselves. Collectively groups recognized their common oppression and changed the names given to them by dominant forces. "Girl" changed to "woman," "Negro" changed to "black" (and later "African-American"), "Indian" changed to "Native-American," and "homosexual/fag/butch" changed to "gay" and "lesbian." A collective consciousness cannot protect excluded and minority groups from actual physical intimidation and force used by dominant forces. By naming themselves, however, groups can create new and positive identities by rejecting an imposed set of symbols given to them by a more powerful group.

How does the language used by the dominant forces operate to empower the powerful? How does the manipulation of language and symbols work to exclude and include certain groups of people? How do those who are excluded from the dominant discourse form their own group or individual identity? For America, answers lie in Robert Bellah's claim that the "language of individualism is the primary American language of self-understanding."² But this claim becomes problematic when middle class, white, American women, for example, have traditionally been denied access to individuality and defined in reference to their husbands' "self," beginning as long ago as the American Revolution.

¹ (Attributed to Lillie Devereux Blake.) Sylvia D. Hoffert, *When Hens Crow: The Woman's Rights Movement in Antebellum America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 1.

² Linda K. Kerber, *Toward an Intellectual History of Women: Essays by Linda K. Kerber* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 223.

The American War for Independence created a sovereign nation of united states based on the premise “that all men are created equal” and are entitled to “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” Appearing all-inclusive and empowering, this language was a force that eventually pulled many colonial Americans together in the hopes of creating “a more perfect union.” A war was not only taking place between America and Great Britain, but a cultural revolution was under way in America as well. What it meant to be a citizen instead of a subject of the king, for instance, had to be defined. Women, slaves, and servants all questioned what independence from Britain might mean for them. Most importantly, however, colonists redefined revolutionary rhetoric during and after the war. They manipulated the meanings and symbols of words such as “independence” and “dependence,” “freedom” and “slavery,” “liberty” and “corruption” to meet the emerging demands required to be a legitimate and sovereign nation. In short, the discourse of the Revolution defined colonists as distinctly American and united for the goal of independence and sovereignty.

A minority of Americans (property-holding white men) were primarily responsible for producing the rhetoric of the revolution. They possessed the resources and education to exert their influence over others using a language that appeared to include all Americans, while it actually excluded and marginalized many. Freedom, independence, and sovereignty are empowering words, and for property-holding men, this discourse meant freedom for the nation as well as for white males. They often defined independence in contrast to dependent groups, such as women,

slaves, and propertyless men. "Women's weakness," for example, "became a rhetorical foil for republican manliness."³ It is the great American paradox that *independence* and freedom for the nation (and men) was based on the *dependence* of women, poor white males, and slaves.⁴ In short, the same discourse that represented the ideal nation also denoted white, capitalistic masculinity. Dana Nelson and Joane Nagel have labeled this inseparable link between masculinity and nation as "national manhood" and "hegemonic masculinity," respectively.⁵ One way to understand the organizational force the revolution's ideas had on America is to recognize the gendered, raced, and classed way the nation formed.

The focus of this study is twofold. First, it explores the connection between masculine and national ideals to discover how white, northern middle-class women identified with these principles. Some women began to struggle against the excluding discourse, while others did not challenge this exclusion by working within the constraints of gender prescriptions. Broadly speaking, two types of movements developed during the first half of the nineteenth century because of the ideology expressed by the Revolution. Stemming from the idea of Republican Motherhood, the work of benevolence through education, temperance, and Christian reforms

³ Kerber, 129.

⁴ Edmund S. Morgan, *American Slavery American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1975).

⁵ Dana D. Nelson, *National Manhood: Capitalist Citizenship and the Imagined Fraternity of White Men* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), ix., and Joane Nagel, "Masculinity and

stressed the moral superiority of women as guardians of Christian and democratic values. These “domestic reformers” believed that their domestic “sphere” called them to a social duty and that women had special attributes, just as men.⁶ A different group of women active in abolition movements began to stress the natural rights of all individuals despite race or sex. Many of these “legal reformers,” while still supportive of abolition, created the first woman’s rights movement that specifically advocated for legal equality with men.

Second, this study examines the strategies and success of both the domestic and the legal reformers. The discourse developed and implemented by both movements demonstrates how individuals and groups constructed and altered the meaning of language. For example, poststructuralists have built off structural linguist Ferdinand de Saussure’s primary tenet that language constitutes social reality rather than reflects it.⁷ Poststructuralist theory allows historians to examine how the construction and meaning of “reality” transforms through “competing discourses” of the past. Examining the competing discourses of the legal and domestic reformers illustrates why one discourse was more successful than the other. Social institutions (such as the nation or the family) and practices produce social meaning and shape an individual’s identity. Moreover, individuals are “agents of change,” and therefore

Nationalism: Gender and Sexuality in the Making of Nations,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 21 (March 1998), 249.

⁶ Anne M. Boylan, “Women in Groups: An Analysis of Women’s Benevolent Organizations in New York and Boston, 1797-1840,” *Journal of American History* 71 (December 1984): 497-523. Boylan demonstrates that women in Christian benevolence societies were from different social and economic classes than women in more “radical” reforms such as temperance. What is important to stress, however, is that both believed in the essential qualities of women’s moral superiority.

⁷ Chris Weedon, *Feminist Practice and Postructuralist Theory* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987), 22.

discourses will “either serve hegemonic interests or challenge existing power relations.”⁸ Thus, the discourse employed by the domestic reformers proved to be a more penetrating force in sensitizing the rest of American culture for women’s entry into the male public realm than the discourse used by the legal reformers before 1860.

Because masculine and national identity became so intertwined, early reformers such as Catharine Beecher and later suffragists such as Isabella Beecher Hooker found they had to work within national definitions to gain legal, economic, and social rights. Historians have emphasized the leaders of the suffrage movement as the ones who first developed a “feminist consciousness” by demanding equal rights for women. While this may be true, many leaders subsequently changed their ideology after the United States Congress passed the Reconstruction amendments to the Constitution. A rights-based argument took a backseat to an essentialist one. Challenging hegemonic masculinity by demanding equal rights (or access to a masculine/nation-defining discourse), as women did in 1848 at Seneca Falls, did not work to gain women significant equal representation. The only way women could start obtaining rights was through a specific type of female discourse that did not challenge the ideals of national manhood. This female discourse stemmed from people such as Judith Sargent Murray, Benjamin Rush, Sara Joshephina Hale, and most importantly, Catherine Beecher. While one cannot disregard the right’s based ideology formed and expressed by prominent suffrage leaders like Elizabeth Cady

⁸ Weedon, 25.

Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, and Lucretia Mott, it was an ideology such as Beecher's that worked to gain women further access to the public realm.

The development of a domestic discourse and strategy used first by female reformers and then by suffragists helped reinforce the national and masculine ideals that had been in development since Revolutionary times. Suffragists started using an essentialist argument that stressed their female character. They argued that only through (white) female enfranchisement would the nation remain healthy. Explicit in these arguments was the idea that enfranchised blacks and immigrants would destroy the nation. If men gave white women the vote, however, women could protect the nation from degradation by fulfilling their natural roles as guardians of democratic values. Suffragists began to downplay claims of natural rights, which worked to disregard issues of race and class. They worked instead to create a gendered partnership with their white husbands and brothers. Ultimately, this strategy reinforced the exclusionary process of the nation.

This study proceeds chronologically. The second chapter concentrates on the construction of national manhood by viewing specific terms and images employed by colonial men. The male discourse of the Revolutionary era demonstrates the development of an intricate link between masculinity and nation. Independence, for example, changed from a negative and divisive characteristic for men into a positive goal for which all (white) males could strive. An independent man became the ideal

American, and as a group, these men comprised the backbone of the new nation. Men had an obligation, then, to support and protect dependent groups, such as slaves, women, and children. These new definitions united men despite regional, cultural, and class differences. Even if a man lacked property, independence remained a plausible goal. Furthermore, women endured marginal status during the construction of this national model. They remained static images of national purity and self-sacrificing supporters of their husbands.

The third chapter examines the ideology of Catherine Beecher. What makes Beecher different from other domestic strategists, such as Hale, is that she believed that men and women should fill separate stations not because it was "natural," but because it served the social good of America. Believing in the necessity of the separate-sphere philosophy, she was a firm anti-suffragist. She formed a distinct ideology based on female moral superiority that did not challenge prescribed gender roles and expectations, but instead reinforced them. Women, in her view, had a self-sacrificing obligation to educate the children of America as teachers and mothers. Beecher hoped to create a partnership with men and believed gender prescriptions were the key. As with the "founding fathers" all-inclusive ideals that united men across vast differences, Beecher's ideology claimed to include all women. Even though black (slave and free), immigrant, and lower class white women could not fit into such a narrow definition of womanhood, Beecher felt that female moral superiority was something for which all women could aim. In doing so, women

would not only find a positive and valuable female identity, but also elevate the nation to "perfection" in partnership with men.

Chapter 4 explores the discourse and strategy of the women's rights movement before the Civil War. Through the use of specific metaphors, activists challenged men to look at the gendered and exclusive model of the nation. By projecting the image of the white, female slave, for instance, women asked men to think seriously about the legal position of their wives and sisters. Moreover, women also represented themselves as warriors, architects, and mechanics to prove that they had the same mental capabilities as men and could help propel the nation forward. These metaphors helped women right's activists envision a more inclusive, democratic nation. Yet, the original rights-based arguments used by legal reformers such as Stanton, Anthony, and Mott could not break down the hegemonic rhetoric of masculinity. After the Civil War and the Reconstruction amendments, women rights activists adopted a rhetoric and strategy that modeled Beecher's domestic ideology.

Through using a domestic discourse, white, middle-class women began to gain specific legal, economic, and social rights. Without the development of a domestic ideology, the suffrage movement might have taken a different turn. Conversely, without early natural-rights reformers such as Mott and the Grimke sisters, Beecher and other domestic theoreticians would not have felt the need to defend domesticity. Thus, two different groups of women should receive recognition for gaining women political rights. Beecher was not a feminist, yet a domestic ideology like hers gained women the vote. One unfortunate effect is that this

ideology worked to exclude and marginalize black, immigrant, and lower-class women and men, and perpetuate the gendered, raced, and classed model of the American nation into the twentieth century.

CHAPTER 2

CONSTRUCTING THE AMERICAN NATION

“The question is,” said Alice, “whether you can make words mean so many different things.”

“The question is,” said Humpty Dumpty, “which is to be master – that’s all.”
Lewis Carroll¹

The American Revolution solidified a “gendered” system of organization among its collective members. The primary goal of any nation-building project is to create a system of sovereign order and stability among its people. Ordering ideas on gender, both implicitly and explicitly, became key to organizing the American nation. Revolutionary rhetoric and its changing meaning demonstrates why this transformation in culture and emphasis on gender began, as well as the implications it held for the future citizens of the United States. Definitions for (white) masculinity and nation became intricately intertwined and inseparable, while definitions for femininity began to embody directly opposite and negative connotations. In short, men began basing their identity on independence and sovereignty, while women tried to understand their identity in reference to a newly defined dependency.

The Revolution’s changing rhetoric and symbolism illustrate how colonists began to construct and justify the excluding parameters of the new nation, as well as how white

males were able to radically alter their previous identity and consolidate white male power. Terms such as “independence,” “liberty,” and “virtue,” and symbolic images such as the new “national family” reveal three compelling developments within the construction of the American nation. First, gender dichotomies became increasingly important, creating a new separate-sphere ethos between white men and women. Second, white, male power consolidated into a “fraternal” order that exercised hegemonic control over dependent groups of Americans. And third, “hegemonic manhood” forced an identity among dependent groups who had to find a positive way to reconcile the irony that they were subjects in a “free” nation. These developments can be explained by examining the transformation of the terms “independence,” “liberty,” and “virtue” and the symbolic images of the national family. Before directly examining the transformation of revolutionary rhetoric and imagery, however, some basic concepts of “nation” need to be identified and discussed.

Defining Nation

Several important components have developed within the study of nation. There are three basic points to identify. First, nation, like race and gender, is a social construction; second, members believe nation to be a “natural” event that is fixed and unchanging; and last, national projects work to organize the way its members will live. Understanding these elements of nation enables one to see that nationhood is not

¹ Alfred F. Young, ed., *Beyond the American Revolution: Explorations in the History of American*

necessarily an inevitable development when a group of subjected people come together to demand sovereignty. Rather, nation-building is a complex, dynamic process that often takes on contradictory and violent forms of expression as groups compete to define national definitions.

First, a "nation" is a social construction, just as race and gender are social constructions. This may sound simplistic, yet most members of national collectives believe nations to be fixed and unchanging, just as they believe race and gender to be constant. Benedict Anderson states:

Nation-ness, as well as nationalism, are cultural artefacts of a particular kind, to understand them properly we need to consider carefully how they have come into historical being, in what ways their meanings have changed over time, and why, today they command such profound emotional legitimacy.²

One can easily substitute race and gender for "nation-ness" and "nationalism." Many Americans view "nation" as a real, tangible entity, interchangeable with other defining terms such as America, the United States, and "our country." Most Americans would agree with Joseph Stalin, who stated that "a nation is a historically evolved, stable community of language, territory, economic life and psychological makeup manifested in a community of culture."³ It sounds logical, and if asked what makes "our country" America, the answer would adamantly be "freedom!" The belief stands strong that "our

Radicalism (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1993), 124.

² Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983), 4.

³ E. J. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 5.

country” has been free since “we” declared independence. This is the “emotional legitimacy” Americans continually accord to “their” nation.

Actually, the understanding Americans have had of freedom, independence, and citizenship has been in an ever-changing process since before the Revolution. One example is how citizenship originally stressed the reciprocal relationship between rights *and* obligations that *property-holding, white men* had to the nation. Today more emphasis is put on the rights (not obligations) that are entitled to *all* American citizens *because* they are Americans.⁴ Hence, “emotional legitimacy” and the attachment to the idea of a “free” nation have overshadowed the constructs of an exclusive nation. Identifying nation as social construction allows historians to probe the way members of national collectives identify with one another, how relations of power are broken down, and how others outside of the collective are viewed.

Second, members of national collectives have historically viewed these nation-building projects as inherently “natural” events rather than a fluid, changing process, which is why they feel such a deep tie with “their” nation. As Anderson has argued, a nation “is an imagined political community – imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign . . . in the minds of each [fellow member] lives the image of their communion,” even if these members have never met one another.⁵ This is one reason why words such as freedom and equality provide such a profound “legitimacy” to the American nation. A nation’s identity cannot be questioned or challenged if it is a “natural” progression. As an overwhelming human need to feel (or imagine) as part of a larger collective,

Americans are willing even to die for their nation, "because regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship."⁶

Moreover, a nation oriented toward the future can create a subjective sense of commitment even when there is no sense of a shared past.⁷ In abstract ways, the young United States "imagined" a common future of democracy. While this common destiny of liberty and freedom applied explicitly to free, white males, it also implied an abstract notion of equality among excluded groups. Especially by evoking images of a "national family," national projects have been able to legitimize acts of exclusion by characterizing a "natural hierarchy" of men, women, and children of all ranks and races.⁸ What needs to be emphasized at this point is the organizational force that the word "natural" possessed in nation-building America.

Third, nation-building organizes the way members of collectives live, and to certain degree, think and act. The way members structure their nation places boundaries of expectation and acceptance upon every group in the collective. When groups or individuals step out of expected and accepted boundaries, other members view the actions of these people as a threat to national stability. While American culture had been in transformation before the outbreak of war, the Revolution accelerated Enlightenment

⁴ Linda Kerber, *No Constitutional Right to be Ladies: Women and the Obligations of Citizenship* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1998), ix-xxiv.

⁵ Anderson, 6.

⁶ Anderson, 7.

⁷ Nira Yuval-Davis, *Gender and Nation* (London: SAGE Publications, 1997), 19.

⁸ Anne McClintock, "Family Feuds: Gender, Nationalism and the Family," *Feminist Review*, 44 (Summer 1993), 64.

ideals of the “natural rights of man.” Thus, colonial Americans viewed the “progression” from subjected colonies to an independent nation as an inherent process – a natural right (or rite) of men. Yet, Hobsbawm demonstrates that

Nations as a natural, God-given way of classifying men, as an inherent . . . political destiny, are a myth; nationalism, which sometimes takes pre-existing cultures and turns them into nations, sometimes invents them, and often obliterates pre-existing cultures; *that* is a reality.⁹

Furthermore, the debates that took place in America between 1776 and 1787 suggest that powerful men consciously knew what type of nation they were building. The final blueprint (the United States Constitution) sanctioned individual rights and independent competition among men in a new market economy for the first time in Anglo-American history. Thus, as will be discussed later, influential colonists made a conscious effort to “obliterate” the “communal” colonial man in exchange for a new national “self-made” man.¹⁰ Stressing natural gender roles became an essential component in this development of the new national culture. Emphasizing gender enabled a revolution in radical ideas to take place for men in their “natural” political sphere, while women’s domain and gender expectations supposedly remained relatively unchanged. It also placed strict boundaries on male and female modes of thought and action.

Viewing nation as a social construction that forces identity – including national, group, and individual identity – adds to the complexity of how to approach and understand the gendered construction of the American nation. Ultimately, this gendered construct paved the way for the acceptance of Catharine Beecher’s domestic ideology,

⁹ Hobsbawm, 5.

and produced the roadblocks for the legal reformers' rights-based argument. We can now take a closer look at the rhetoric and imagery employed during the American Revolution. The transformation of such terms as "independence," "liberty," and "virtue" into "American" definitions and the symbol of the new "national family" reveal how one group of men (however diverse) consolidated and justified power over all other Americans.

American Definitions

Changes in language and imagery were key to an identity-making process among American men that centralized their group power and defined the ideological parameters of the new nation. A cultural transformation occurred throughout the eighteenth century that called for a reorganization of gender roles. As noted earlier, the Revolution accelerated this transformation. For one, production increasingly moved away from the home. In effect, women's contributions to home production, and thus women's work, was no longer as valued.¹¹ Women also were becoming responsible for the education and moral upbringing of both sons and daughters, since the father spent more time away from the home. Moreover, with the developing market economy, men began to see independence and individuality as a positive goal instead of a characteristic that would tear communities apart. Expectations of "manhood" changed radically as the "self-made

¹⁰ Anthony Rotundo, *American Manhood: Transformations in Masculinity from the Revolution to the Modern Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1993), 19.

man” replaced the “communal man.”¹² Ultimately, colonists reworked traditional gender prescriptions to fit the needs of the emerging nation. Examining the changing Revolutionary rhetoric and the creation of the image of a new American family is one way to view this transformation in culture.

The Language

People understand language and the symbols attached to it within situational contexts. For instance, an American woman in 1787 would proclaim she was free, although common law designated her as a dependent. “A vocabulary stays alive only to the degree that it names things people know . . . [and] to the extent that these things are ritually verified in day-to-day social practice.”¹³ If definitions of words were unchanging there would be no problem. Yet, “some vocabulary attaches itself unnoticed, to new things.”¹⁴ This creates many problems for social historians attempting to show changing gender patterns through the language of the Revolution. Thus, this chapter emphasizes the dominant discourse employed by the most influential men of the Revolution. These men had the power and resources to influence public opinion and created the masculine definitions of independence with which many women later struggled. Moreover, it is not as important to examine how changes in individual terms occurred as it is to question the

¹¹ Gerda Lerner, “The Lady and the Mill Girl: Changes in the Status of Women in the Age of Jackson, 1800-1840,” in *A Heritage of Her Own: Toward a New Social History of American Women*, ed. Nancy F. Cott and Elizabeth H. Pleck (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979), 184.

¹² Rotundo, 19.

¹³ Barbara Fields, “Ideology and Race in American History,” in *Region, Race, and Reconstruction: Essays in Honor of C. Vann Woodward*, ed. J. Morgan Kousser and James M. McPherson (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 153.

¹⁴ Fields, 153.

significance new definitions had on gendered thought and organization. In short, colonists manipulated terms into distinctly American definitions that worked specifically for the benefit of white, landholding males.

Historians such as Joan Gundersen, Edward Countryman, and Ruth Bloch successfully demonstrate how meanings of individual words changed as the nation organized.¹⁵ This transformation in language explains how one group legitimized and justified a “free” nation that kept slaves and women subordinate. First, “independence” transformed from a negative into a positive ideal in which all men could strive, while its counterpart, “dependence,” took on connotations of powerlessness. Next, “liberty” developed alongside “independence” and moved away from implying a way to preserve “communal continuity” towards building American concepts of citizenship based on land ownership, economic competition, and material gain. Third, “virtue” changed from a self-sacrificial, public, male characteristic into a private, feminine, yet indirectly political, attribute.

“Independence” became the cornerstone of national identity. However, throughout the 1700s colonists viewed independent men as divisive, at least in New England society. Preserving communal order was much more important than “innovative” ideas that might break up that harmony. In 1704 a minister lamented that “this Sheba, SELF, has blown the trumpet of rebellion.”¹⁶ The ideal world was “an

¹⁵ Joan R. Gundersen, “Independence, Citizenship, and the American Revolution,” *Signs* 13 (1987), 59-77; Edward Countryman, “To Secure the Blessings of Liberty: Language, the Revolution, and American Capitalism,” in *Beyond the American Revolution: Explorations in the History of American Radicalism*, ed. Alfred F. Young (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press), 124-148; Ruth H. Bloch, “The Gendered Meanings of Virtue in Revolutionary America,” *Signs* (1987), 37-58.

¹⁶ Rotundo, 15.

organic social order in which rights and responsibilities were reciprocal and in which terms like *individuality* or *self-reliance* had little place.”¹⁷ Colonists recognized “dependency” not as a powerless, defenseless state of subjection, but rather as a “web” that tied individual to family to community and ultimately to the Crown. John Dickenson acknowledged this as late as 1775, arguing that if “we . . . change the signification of words, let us preserve and carefully maintain this *dependence* which has been, down to this very last hour, the principle and source of our prosperity, of our liberty, of our real independence.”¹⁸ Colonists may not have all enjoyed the same privileges or obligations, but they worked within a “web of dependency” built upon class and deference that kept the community together. This “web” threatened to tear as colonists accused England of overstepping their authority.

As tension increased between the colonists and Great Britain, a new significance was placed on independence. Other factors contributed to this emphasis as well. For example, the influence of the Enlightenment stressed the “natural rights” of the individual to self-determination and self-government. Moreover, the development of a market economy pulled men out of their homes for work and actual material profit, which encouraged individual competition among men. Even the Great Awakening stressed individual relationships with God. Yet, while a new emphasis on individuality may have been advancing, Revolutionary ideology greatly accelerated independence into a positive goal for American men.

¹⁷ Rotundo, 13.

¹⁸ William Dudley, ed., *The American Revolution: Opposing Viewpoints* (San Diego: Greenhaven Press, Inc., 1992), 136.

One way colonists defined "independence" in positive terms was to contrast it to "dependence," which in effect, stripped "dependence" of its voluntary connotations.¹⁹ Colonists felt that Great Britain had violated the system of dependency that had kept crown and subjects tied together for hundreds of years. They believed the crown broke the intimate, reciprocal relationship by taking English liberties away and imposing unfair taxes, rules, and regulations. Citizens of Massachusetts in 1776 declared that Britain had "lost their love to freedom, they have lost their spirit of just resentment; we therefore renounce with disdain our connection with a kingdom of slaves."²⁰ Independence from England meant freedom from tyranny, while dependence on England became strongly associated with powerlessness, effeminacy, weakness, and slavery of the colonies. This had dire consequences for women, blacks (slave and free), and propertyless men, who retained their dependent status after the break from England.

Through the new notion of citizenship, colonists gave up their subjected status and pledged allegiance to a new American nation. Thus, a system of voluntary state citizenship developed that recognized adult white men and women as citizens, but assumed married women's dependence. Colonists rejected virtual representation in Parliament, yet applied it to colonial legislatures and families. American leaders assumed that dependents shared identical interests with those who could vote. "Generally speaking, women and Children have as good judgement, and as independent Minds as those men who are wholly destitute of Property," explained John Adams. He continued, "these last being to all Intents and Purposes as much dependent on others, who will

¹⁹ Gundersen, 62.

please to feed, cloathe, and employ them, as women upon their Husbands, or Children on their Parents."²¹ Hence, many men balked at the idea of women being part of an independent group, capable of making self-interested decisions. Instead, women were to fuse themselves into the identity of their husbands. This sustained the image that representative power remained centered in the family.

Abigail Adams is good example of a woman who defined her independence on the Adams' farm during the Revolution as a form of dependence on her husband. Although she asked her husband to "remember the ladies," she viewed women as the ultimate helpmate of their husbands. Her energies to keep the family business running smoothly were an extension of her husband's interest. Thus, even though gender relations were upset, as they are with every war, women had no avenue to gain independence. After the war, they remained confined to the domestic sphere, expected to marry and stay subordinate to their husbands.

The property-holding qualification ultimately solidified the new meaning of citizenship. To be eligible for the franchise, one had to be adult, male, and own property. Thus, women would not be able to vote even if they remained single property-holders, or became property-holding widows. Citizenship was ultimately an individual act, and because one had to own property to vote, citizenship became intricately tied to economic interest. Furthermore, because independence was such a powerful force in defining the new American man -- for as stated earlier, even propertyless men could reach for the new "American dream" of economic prosperity -- colonists continually

²⁰ Dudley, 130.

characterized "dependence" as a negative and feminine characteristic. Thus, independence, citizenship, and economic interest became intricately tied together to define not only the American nation, but American manhood as well.

"Liberty," much like "independence," was also assigned a distinctive American meaning. Countryman argues that the Revolution and its aftermath marked the transition to capitalism with "liberty" as the central ideological symbol.²² One of the reasons "liberty" became a major mark of the Revolution was partly because of the openness of the term. "Liberty" implied many types of diverse freedoms, including individual, civic, sovereign, communal, "gospel," and legal freedom.²³ Yet, not all English subjects were entitled to the same liberties. With the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, colonists emphasized economic liberty and its tie to communities. Hence, the "liberty" of a community's right to control their economy changed from preserving a deferential and structured way of life to a "natural" and equal way of life where men united through a sanctioned and national idea of economic freedom.

Traditionally "ownership meant having a badge of community membership, not a commodity for trade."²⁴ English liberty stressed the freedom for individual communities to control their economies through price controls, "mob" rule, and shutting off trade from outside markets. The meaning of "liberty" had always been bound up closely with the "gritty" reality of unfreedom.²⁵ Yet, English "liberty" protected subjects from tyranny and unchecked authority of the government and crown. When colonists

²¹ As quoted in Gundersen, 65.

²² Countryman, 124-125.

²³ Countryman, 129-130.

²⁴ Countryman, 128.

accused Britain of taking colonial liberties away, they employed “liberty” in the traditional English sense of preserving English rights. Many colonists placed resistances, such as against the Stamp Act, in the context of British history. The Connecticut Assembly explained in reference to the Stamp Act that “if these internal taxation take place,” English liberty will be destroyed, for colonists “will no longer enjoy that fundamental privilege of Englishmen whereby, in special, they are denominated a free people.”²⁶ This reference to British freedom sounded quite similar to rhetoric used thirty years earlier when Londoners were protesting the gin excise. “If we are English men let us show we have English spirits and not tamely submit to the yolk just ready to be fastened about our necks.”²⁷ As tensions increased, and the Declaration of Independence was written, colonists began forming a new definition of “liberty” that emphasized a broader American economy.

The United States Constitution became the document that sanctioned a new market economy, protecting citizen’s rights to compete for material gain. This was a radical change from the idea that communities were at liberty to regulate their own trade and keep commerce subordinate to social well-being. The Constitution “and the jurisprudence that flowed from it were to be authoritative, even hegemonic in American society.”²⁸ It opened the way for industrialization and commercialization, took away customary rights of communities to close against outside markets, and formed a general law that would prevail against custom.

²⁵ Countryman, 125.

²⁶ Dudley, 56.

²⁷ As quoted in Countryman, 130-131.

²⁸ Countryman, 138.

Ultimately, personal economic liberty and civic political liberty increasingly became congruent, which again marginalized women's access to liberty. Liberty's link to economic freedom tied men into a consolidated group and forced women, slaves, and other dependents to question what liberty meant for them. They had access to abstract notions of liberty as part of the nation, but no practical access to economic liberty as men possessed.

"Virtue" transformed from a public, masculine attribute into a feminine characteristic where women were expected to instill patriotism and morals into future Americans. Virtue was the most valued quality defining individual commitment to the American Republican cause. One reason was that both classical republicanism and Protestant traditions stressed the value of public virtue and a good relationship between the rulers and the populace.²⁹ Virtue's transformation away from a masculine towards a feminine ideal altered and solidified gender distinctions of the new nation.

Traditionally, the meaning of "virtue" stemmed from the Latin root "vir" which meant man, and thus "virtus" meant those qualities that made up a "real man."³⁰ Virtuous men were "exemplary citizens . . . daring soldiers and inspired orators – those who risked danger and won glory in valiant defense of liberty."³¹ Intrinsic in this meaning was the idea that men had a self-sacrificial obligation to the state as well as to their ruler. "Glory is the reward of honourable toils, and public fame is the just retribution for public service;" explained minister John Hurt before Virginia troops in 1777, "the love of which is so connected to virtue, that it seems scarcely possible to be

²⁹ Bloch, 41.

possessed of the latter without some degree of the former.”³² Thus, throughout the Revolutionary war, virtue remained an inherently male characteristic.

As the deferential and communal system began to break down, so did the male public meaning of virtue. Men were creating a government where the conditions of independence from Britain and economic and civic liberty depended on factional competition and balanced government. No longer would the self-sacrificial ideal of the “communal man” form the basis of good government, but rather “reason, justice and Enlightenment” would underpin the new American government.³³ As the nation built around the Constitution, public virtue was relocated outside of the state in the institutional base of churches, schools, and families – not in the military of participatory government.

Women also traditionally had been able to possess qualities of virtue, but they were exclusively private virtues of sexual purity, piety, temperance, frugality, and work in a useful calling. As men built a world where self-sacrificial virtue gave them no benefit, women increasingly assumed a larger role in the task of state building. Thus, a feminine notion of virtue took on political significance and women expressed this through the role of Republican Motherhood.

The development of Republican Motherhood demonstrates how the meaning of “virtue” changed into a specific female attribute. Instead of men having a civic duty to the community, women began to embody the civic need by indirectly influencing future

³⁰ Bloch, 43.

³¹ Bloch, 43.

³² As quoted in Bloch, 44.

³³ Bloch, 54.

generations of Americans. "How should it enflame the desire of the mothers and daughters of our land to be the occasions of so much good to themselves and others!" proclaimed minister William Lyman in 1802, he proceeded, "You will easily see that here is laid the basis of public virtue; of union peace and happiness in society . . . Mothers do, in a sense, hold the reins of government and sway the ensigns of national prosperity and glory."³⁴

As women began presiding over the morals of the nation, a new distinction between men and women formed. "Virtue" had originally separated men into two groups – ones committed to public service versus the men who pursued the "Sheba" of self-interest. However, as virtue lost its public appeal, the newfound difference could be seen through the gendered roles of self-interested men and virtuous women. In effect, this new distinction between men and women "eased the process by which all white men (whether rich or poor, individually 'virtuous' or not) could become political actors and all women could not."³⁵ This transition of virtue sharpened boundaries between the sexes to the degree that both domestic and legal reformers struggled to understand their indirect political role that denied them real decision-making power.

Changes in these terms demonstrate how America formed along gendered lines. Women became a foil for men's as well as the nation's identity. Because of the empowering words of "independence," "liberty," and "virtue," women continued to be included within the sovereignty of the United States. Yet, they were excluded from the actual power that independence and liberty gave to men. Furthermore, they were

³⁴ As quoted in Bloch, 116.

relegated to the supportive and “virtuous” role of Republican Motherhood that veiled the fact that they had no direct political power. Frustrations among some women consequently increased as the nation moved into the nineteenth century.

The National Family

Gendered imagery developed alongside the changing terminology. Major images of the Revolution illuminate the way men viewed their emerging identity, as well as how they viewed women in relation to men. Within this examination one must question the power symbolic images had on colonists, because like language, images readjust parallel to a group’s or individual’s understanding of his or her situation. The example that has been most persistent until the present-day is the icon of the family to reflect national ideology. Colonists began to reject hierarchical and deferential social structures, and hence, a new model of the family was necessary to organize society. Before the American Revolution, British subjects viewed the family as a mini-structure of government with the father/king as the patriarchal ruler of the household/subjects. Altering gender relations before the Revolution made it possible for the family to be transformed into a symbol of the American nation. In the eyes of most Americans, “natural” hierarchy replaced the arbitrary tyranny and patriarchy of “traditional” families.³⁶

To show this imagery more specifically, take one of the most famous images of the Révolution – the “Sons of Liberty.” These men had “naturally” outgrown the need of

³⁵ Bloch, 57-58.

a father. Thomas Paine reached colonists with this idea in 1776 with the pamphlet *Common Sense* insisting that the “Father of His People” had violated the “names of parent and child.” He asked colonists to approach the idea of dependence “on the principles of nature and common sense” and to understand “the independency of the Continent, as an event which sooner or later must arrive, so from the late rapid progress of the *Continent to Maturity*, the event could not be far off.”³⁷ Paine’s use of family imagery expressed the “natural” progression from dependent sons to independent brothers, as the “sons” of liberty suggests. This growth to maturity also called for the “hardy” and “robust” action of adult colonial men “ready to face danger and death,” because they no longer were under the protection of their father.³⁸

“Liberty” or Mother America, on the other hand, became a symbol and national icon for “freedom” and “independence” – or something that her sons must defend. They defended not only their right to freedom, but also the “purity” of “liberty” that could easily be “ravished” and corrupted by the tyranny (or rapist attitudes) of Britain. As Paine claimed, tyranny was something “nature cannot forgive” and asked “as well can the lover forgive the ravisher of his mistress, as the Continent forgive the murders of Britain [?].”³⁹ Moreover, in contrast to Mother America, England was characterized as an “old, wrinkled, withered, worn-out hag” – a mother unable to control her rebellious sons, or

³⁶ McClintock, 64.

³⁷ Dudley, 146-147.

³⁸ Dudley, 181.

³⁹ Dudley, 149.

(usually) as a corrupted prostitute-mother helping the father/king produce "a kingdom of slaves."⁴⁰

From this formation of a "new" family of Americans, one recognizes the supportive, symbolic role allotted to women. "Mother liberty" becomes an unchanging ideal of pure, uncorrupted freedom that must be protected by her united sons, lest she become a prostitute of the tyrannical king. With independence from Britain, Mother liberty developed into the ideal of Republican Motherhood, instilling patriotism and virtue into her children. Again, the idea of women fulfilling the patriotic duty of "mothering" and nurturing future generations of Americans became a national icon.

In a world rejecting hierarchical forms of societal structure, new family imagery justified "natural" hierarchy in a nation based on equality. Men would take control through defensive measures to protect their sisters, wives, and children, while women would continue to fulfill an enlarged domestic sphere. Moreover, "natural progress" -- like the development of children into adults -- became a model for national progress. This enabled nation-building, however "violent" and "murderous," to be "legitimized as the progressive unfolding of natural decree."⁴¹

The active role played by men and the symbolic role allotted to women in the family reveals another compelling element within the imagery of the "new" American family. Thomas Nairn has identified the "modern Janus" within the study of nation.⁴² Both backward and forward-looking, a nation is a "regressive, jingoistic, militaristic

⁴⁰ Dudley, 156,130.

⁴¹ McClintock, 64.

warfare state' visage versus a progressive community-building 'welfare state' countenance."⁴³ Put in terms of the American experience, gender dichotomies increasingly became emphasized to such a degree that women took on the static image of national tradition ("inert, backward looking, and natural,") while men took on the role of national modernity ("forward-thrusting, potent, and historic.")⁴⁴ Symbolic and static imagery of the traditional national mother in need of defense by her brave sons further explains why a radical change in male identity could take place while gender expectations of women remained roughly uniform. A separate sphere ideology ensured progress and conservation at the same time. Thus, men could move the nation forward through aggressive competition in the new market economy, while women could conserve the "virtuous" qualities of the nation through instilling morals and patriotism into their children.

The force that manipulating words and images had on colonists' understanding of themselves as Americans was tremendous. "Independence," "liberty," and "virtue" all helped to define a distinctly American nation, while the image of the national family solidified a separate sphere ideology. The manipulation of these terms show how gender dichotomies were increasingly stressed to define masculinity, which in effect created a separate sphere ethos. Even though femininity embodied opposite and negative

⁴² Nairn's ideas are discussed in McClintock, 65-66; Joane Nagel, "Masculinity and Nationalism: Gender and Sexuality in the Making of Nations," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 21 (March 1998), 248; and Yuval-Davis, 21.

⁴³ Nagel, 248.

connotations when compared to masculinity, women did receive an indirect political responsibility with the nation through Republican Motherhood. Yet, men manipulated rhetoric and symbols throughout the Revolutionary period that worked to consolidate hegemonic control over dependent groups. This in turn caused women to try to form a positive identity based upon the narrow limitations of Republican Motherhood and exclusion from the public arena.

The following chapters examine the strategy and success of two different groups of women. Domestic theoretician Catharine Beecher recognized the gendered aspects of the new nation, but chose not to challenge the overriding paradigm. Instead, much like the male Revolutionary generation, she manipulated national meaning and rhetoric into a positive definition for women. Legal reformers, on the other hand, directly challenged national definitions that identified women as dependent and incapable for public or political action. While much of their strategy centered on raising Americans' consciousness about women's actual legal and social position, they were not successful at breaking down masculine hegemonic control.

⁴⁴ McClintock, 66.

CHAPTER 3

CONSERVATIVE CATALYST CATHARINE BEECHER

The woman who is rearing a family of children; the woman who labors in the schoolroom; the woman who . . . earns with her needle, the mite to contribute for the intellectual and moral elevation of her country; even the humble domestic . . . all may be cheered by the consciousness, that they are agents in accomplishing the greatest work that ever was committed to human responsibility.¹

The last chapter demonstrated how definitions changed in Revolutionary America to create a new national and masculine identity. These definitions stressed gender distinctions as never before and made clear a positive white male identity. While this new identity remained in flux for many men in the first half of the nineteenth century, independence and liberty remained hallmark identity-defining terms towards which these men could continually work. Female identity, however, was not so clear cut and easily defined in the eyes of many white women.

Women remained subjects in a self-proclaimed and independent nation. Even with the indirect political role of Republican Motherhood, women's frustrations increased throughout the nineteenth century. The transition to commercial capitalism and expanding industrialization continued to marginalize women's contributions in the home.

¹ Catharine E. Beecher, *Treatise on Domestic Economy, for the use of Young Ladies at Home, and at School* (Boston: Marsh, Capen, Lyon, and Webb, 1841), 14.

White, middle-class women were increasingly dependent on male breadwinners, not just for economic support, but also to assure their social peers that they did not have to leave the home to seek a supplementary income. Moreover, women witnessed a growth in the number of white men who could vote when the property qualification was annulled in the 1830s. The "age of the common man" obviously did not include women (or slaves and Native Americans). Thus, many women tried to understand their dependent status in a positive and new light. Catharine Beecher was one of these women, and in many ways she succeeded in shaping a positive female identity within the confines of the male-defined nation.

Beecher worked within the definitions of the new nation and reconciled the tension that many women began to recognize during the Jacksonian age. She straddled a fence. On one side was the older, ordered culture of her Calvinist father Lyman Beecher, while on the other was an appealing new culture of seeming chaos unleashed by "naïve" and clashing ideas on equality and individualism. Catharine's answer was not simply to choose which side of the fence she wanted to be on; instead, she sought to tear the fence down and reconcile her tense world. Because Beecher worked to understand her femaleness in a male-defined world, she is representative of many other white, northern, middle-class women of the nineteenth century. More importantly, however, she helped to further the aims and consolidate national definitions of man and womanhood by becoming one of the most influential domestic theoreticians of Antebellum America. She thus shaped women's strategy, entry, and participation within the political realm, as well

as sensitized the rest of American culture for the acceptance of women into the public arena.

Important experiences in Beecher's life shaped her female identity. She was unable to experience Christian conversion, to the dismay of her Calvinist father. This set a new "worldly" course for Catharine where she emphasized humanitarian (not necessarily secular) accomplishments. She began defining alternatives to shaping moral behavior based not on piety and fear of an angry god, but instead on the female ability to instill goodness in children through education. After years of perseverance, Beecher failed to form a moral department in her Hartford school; moving to Cincinnati, she failed again. The 1830s marked her "trials" of gaining elite respect and support, and she began developing her conservative ideology through a number of essays, including *Suggestions Respecting Improvements in Education*, *The Education of Female Teachers*, and *Slavery and Abolition*. Through her writing, Catharine began to realize a strategy (of working within the constraints of nation) that would work to reach her goal as a transmitter of American culture.

The success of *A Treatise on Domestic Economy* in 1841 solidified Beecher's goal to create separate, yet complimentary gender relations throughout the nation. Widely read and accepted, the book expressed the aim for a valued space for women in partnership with men – something for which she would continually strive. Beecher recognized and constantly struggled within the narrow confines prescribed to her as a woman, which is what makes her such a compelling case study. She did not simply accept the gendered expectations placed upon her, but worked for a broader acceptance of

women's "sphere of usefulness" by manipulating national beliefs. In brief, Beecher designed an argument that elevated women to a moral sphere, not because it was their natural role, but because it would ensure the integrity and health of the new republic. Moreover, her concentration on ordering gender relations excluded lower class, black (slave and free) and immigrant families from her vision of societal order, which made her argument more acceptable to an already exclusive national model.

A Change of Heart

Born in 1800, Catharine Beecher was immersed in an emerging national culture that sanctioned individualism. Not all Americans agreed with these "selfish" notions, and this was particularly evident in Catharine's Calvinist upbringing. Minister Lyman Beecher was notorious for his revivalism throughout the Long Island region and struggled to preserve an older hierarchical order of "communal men." Yet, if anyone molded and shaped the ambitious and autonomous nature of Catharine Beecher it was her father. As the first child and the "best boy he ever had," Catharine enjoyed intimate time with her father touring the farm settlements of his parish.² She also recognized the power her father wielded over his parishioners as well as the Beecher household. Later in life, Catharine remembered how her "house became in reality a school of the highest kind, in

² Jeanne Boydston, Mary Kelley, and Anne Margolis, ed., *The Limits of Sisterhood: The Beecher Sisters on Women's Rights and Woman's Sphere* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 272.

which he was all the while exerting a powerful influence upon the mind and character of his children.”³

Catharine admired and envied this power of authority, and at an early age she too yearned to “be head.” These feelings towards autonomy and self-determination would prove to be the most difficult for Catharine to cope with as she approached adulthood, for her Calvinist religion expected her to submit her will first to God and then to a husband. Beecher thoroughly enjoyed her carefree youth, however, remembering it as “a period of unalloyed happiness . . . there is an impression of sunshine, love, and busy activity, without any memory of a jar or cloud.”⁴ Much of Catharine’s happiness came from the freedom she was granted to explore her individuality and talents within the Beecher home as well as in school. Her father’s influence and example dominated her life, yet her education also nourished and encouraged a certain degree of self-assertion.

Through “sociability” and “self-confidence,” Catharine easily rose to the top of Miss Pierce’s school in her early adolescent years.⁵ An academy for young ladies, the school stressed religious and moral instruction over academics to cultivate “refined manners” and make young women agreeable to their elders and peers. For example, each student kept a “private” journal. The best entries were read in front of the class, and thus students recorded their private thoughts in a way that would be presentable and acceptable for public scrutiny. Though her journals have not survived, Catharine took pleasure in reading hers aloud. Moreover, the school allowed Catharine to develop a

³ As quoted in Kathryn Kish Sklar, *Catharine Beecher: A Study in American Domesticity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973), 10.

⁴ As quoted in Sklar, 19.

⁵ Sklar, 18.

formalized role as leader of her friends through theatrics. She enjoyed creating dramas that were performed for the community; as her biographer Kathryn Kish Sklar argues, it enabled her to “order” and understand “experience,” a characteristic that would persist throughout Beecher’s life.⁶ In short, Catharine’s scholastic experiences taught her how to express herself socially, which would later become a principal part of her life.

The emphasis her school experience placed on social consciousness and the dominant influence by Lyman hindered Catharine’s ability to experience religious conversion a few years later in her life. In her twenty-first year, Lyman began pressuring his daughter to start the conversion process. She was not only ready to leave the household, but had also accepted the marriage proposal of Alexander Fisher. Calvinist religion expected every person to “strip” before God and expose his or her sinful and unworthy self before Him. The process began with the “soul’s awakening to its neglect of God, followed by a profound conviction of its sinful state, and finally the soul’s repentance of its sins and full submission to God.”⁷ Yet, Catharine wrestled with and recognized the difference of her experience when compared to that of her brothers. While both men and women must submit to the will of God, men could recover their sense of independence and self. Women, on the other hand, submitted first to God and then to a husband. Catharine became torn between the example of her mother, who submerged her identity into the character of Lyman, and the overbearing example of her father. Catharine quietly resisted submission.

⁶ Sklar, 19.

⁷ Sklar, 31.

Not quite a year later in May, Beecher found out about her fiancé's death at sea. She struggled to accept the fact that Fisher died unconverted and – in Calvinist belief – damned. Her father informed her of his death through a letter providing comforting words on how to live with sorrow. He then asked Catharine what she would now do,

Will you turn at length to God, and set your affections on things above, or cling to the shipwrecked hopes of earthly good? Will you send your thoughts to heaven and find peace, or to the cliffs, and winds, and waves of Ireland, to be afflicted, tossed with tempest and not comforted?⁸

Fisher's death did not weaken Catharine's resistance, and if anything it only reinforced her will. She could not believe that Fisher was condemned to hell. Writing to her brother in June she cried, "Oh, Edward, where is he now? Are the noble faculties of such a mind doomed to everlasting woe, or is he now with our dear mother in the mansions of the blessed?"⁹ She would be able to answer this question by the beginning of the New Year. Yet, before this was possible, she would have to establish emotional independence from her father and assert her own religious beliefs.

Catharine never entirely became free from Lyman's dominant influence, and he remained a looming force in her life. However, part of her problem with conversion was her reluctance to leave the Beecher household, and in a sense, channel her loyalties away from her family. Moreover, she was unable to accept her previous twenty years as nothing more than sinful attachment to worldly concerns. In a revealing letter to her father, Catharine characterized herself as a "helpless frail bark" trying to make its way through a "swift current no mortal could ever stem." She observed that there is "One

⁸ As quoted in Sklar, 37.

⁹ Boydston, Kelley, and Margolis, 31.

standing upon the shore who can relieve my distress, who is all powerful to save; but He regards me not." Lyman quickly answered her call for help by assuming the persona of God: "I saw that frail boat," he said, and "I have pressed on through tears and blood to her rescue." He explained that the "outstretched hand" had gone unnoticed for years, and unless Catharine chose to submit, "the stream will role on, and the bark, the oar, and the voyager be seen no more."¹⁰ Lyman, unable to give the emotional strength for which Catharine sought, refused her distress signals. While the "One" Catharine referred to was God, she also called for her "One" influential father to guide her and provide some new answers for her. Lyman kept his distance, however, and continued to encourage Catharine's submission to God. This distance provided the space for Catharine's emotional self to grow.

By the beginning of 1823, Catharine confidently took a stand on religion in opposition to her father. She explained that "I must believe this; it is the only way in which I can perceive or realize that God is merciful and good . . . and that he *is* a rewarder of those who diligently seek him." She continued:

I believe that a merciful Savior has not left him [Fisher] to perish at last; and that in the Day of Judgement we shall find that God is influenced in bestowing his grace by *the efforts of men*; that he does make the needful distinction between virtue and vice; and that there was more reason to hope for *one whose whole life had been an example of excellence*, than for one who had spent all his days in guilt and sin . . .¹¹

Catharine's emphasis on Fisher's "example of excellence" partly came from her reading of his private journal, where she found that Fisher was also unable to experience

¹⁰ Boydston, Kelley, and Margolis, 32-33.

¹¹ Boydston, Kelley, and Margolis, 34-35 emphasis added.

conversion. Thus, she was not only justifying Fisher's goodness to her father, but her own as well.

This was Catharine's first step in forming a "worldly" stance on moral behavior and religion. Rather than realizing one's utter sinfulness and unworthiness, she believed that a person could seek salvation and morality through specific "efforts" and "example[s] of excellence." Living a moral life would include both following the word of God as well as shaping moral behavior within the community. Lyman obviously disagreed and later provided Catharine with the "arguments and exhortations" that she expected. Yet, he did not reject his daughter as unorthodox, even when her primary concern shifted to shaping this new form of humanitarian morality that centered itself on "worldly" attentions and concerns.

Soon after asserting her emotional self to her father, Catharine founded the Hartford Female Seminary. Within six years, the school became renowned for its advances in education for women that provided alternatives to traditional "dame" and "finishing" schools. In addition to an array of rigorous subjects, Catharine also included religion. As her first experiment with shaping the moral behavior of her students, she started leading her own revivals in 1826. "We have a little meeting every day after school for scholars in my room. From 20 to 30 usually attend . . ."¹² Catharine was using her "efforts" and "example" to help her young students through the conversion process. She emulated her father's technique of social leadership, yet, as a woman, came dangerously close in challenging the position of ministers.

¹² Boydston, Kelley, and Margolis, 39.

Unable to experience conversion herself, Catharine's attempt to convert others may seem contradictory. However, she was in a process of forming new Victorian ethos that held that society could be perfected through building institutions and shaping morality. Catharine accomplished building a successful institution for women in Hartford, yet as she set out to combine the roles of educator and minister in a specific moral department, her efforts were never quite realized. She needed more experience to gain support from influential and wealthy elite.

Moreover, Catharine set out to merge morality and behavior. She felt that it was a mother's role to cultivate moral behavior, and by living and acting morally, one could seek salvation. Ultimately, Catherine's inability to experience a "change of heart" and submit her will to God and the untimely death of her fiancé steered her into the direction she would head for the rest of her life. New England culture expected both of these experiences from women, and if Catharine did not marry, her options for any kind of independent life remained narrow. Because of the prominence and influence of the Beecher family, Catharine's opportunities to lead a single life were enhanced. Yet, she did not accept the conventional expectation of "spinsterhood," and instead became determined to support herself. She constantly pushed at the limits that national and masculine definitions placed upon her. When she encountered gendered boundaries, as she did when she decided to remain independent, she struggled for new definitions that would justify her decisions to her family and community.

Trial by Error

Through “trial by error” Catharine was able to fashion an acceptable rhetoric for her future goals. As she emphasized her ideas on moral behavior, she believed that one way to cultivate this new conduct was through an atmosphere where moral behavior was never allowed to lapse. Therefore, she developed an idea for a boarding school for girls where their moral development would be supervised along with their intellectual development. The idea of a boarding school for girls was new to most Americans, and for the most part, they did not condone the idea. Catharine struggled to secure the funds in 1829 for her venture, but in the end failed. Taking the school as far as she felt she could in Hartford, in 1833 she agreed to move West to Cincinnati with her father. While Lyman struggled to evangelize and convert the inhabitants, she struggled to bring an intellectual and moral education to the female population through her Western Female Institute. Throughout her time in Cincinnati, Catharine fine tuned a rhetoric and strategy that made her one of the most influential and best known women of Antebellum America.

To gain the support from influential men and women of America, Catharine followed the example set by her father, meeting with influential men and advocating her cause. She not only needed economic support for her schools, but she required social support and encouragement from the community as well. More importantly, however, are the arguments she used to convince men and women of her objective for female education and shaping moral behavior. In a nation based on masculine identity, Beecher

stressed a reciprocal component of the value of female moral influence in the home and school. This was not a reiteration of dichotomous male/female, independent/dependent realms. Rather, Catharine's goal was for women's moral power independent from male dominance. Thus, women could have a positive, *independent* and *progressive* identity in a nation that defined them as dependent and conservative.

In contrast to her early letters that reveal her developing ideas on morality, these years are documented with a series of essays that demonstrate her approach to gain broad support from influential groups of Americans. These essays argued why Americans should support her cause, and she often wrote after and during considerable opposition to her plans. Three examples of her writing demonstrate the solidification of Beecher's ideology and strategy before her most famous and influential book, *A Treatise on Domestic Economy*. Her *Suggestions Respecting Improvements in Education* placed the teacher and the mother as the female counterpart of the minister. It justified women's education as an extension of the domestic sphere by arguing that only through education could women "form the mind of man."¹³ The *Essay on the Education of Female Teachers* supplied the ideas for a national system of education where women (as teachers) would begin first in Cincinnati, and then move to other important "stations in the nation" to teach. This essay, as well as the *Essay on Slavery and Abolition*, demonstrated a striking new element. Both argued that the nation's ideals of independence and democracy depended on the education and moral development of women.

¹³ Boydston, Kelley, and Margolis, 43.

